

VZCZCXRO3354
RR RUEHAO RUEHRN
DE RUEHMU #0115/01 0561550
ZNY SSSS ZZH
R 251550Z FEB 10
FM AMEMBASSY MANAGUA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0724
INFO WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RHMFIS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0011
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS 0006
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0001
RUEHG/USMISSION GENEVA
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0001
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0001
RUEHRN/USMISSION UN ROME 0005
RUEHSI/AMEMBASSY TBILISI 0001
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 MANAGUA 000115

SIPDIS
DEPT FOR WHA/CEN
DEPT FOR USOAS
DEPT PASS TO USAID/LAC -- JANET BALLENTINE AND ERIC KITE
SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD AND J5
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PASS TO AMCONSUL RECIFE
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PASS TO AMCONSUL QUEBEC
AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PASS TO AMEMBASSY GRENADA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2020/02/24

TAGS: PREL PGOV EAID MARR XR RS IR XK

SUBJECT: (U) Ortega and the U.S.: New-Found True Love Or Another Still-Born Charm Offensive?

REF: A) MANAGUA 182 -- REQUEST TO RENEW STATUS OF FORCES AGREEMENT
B) MANAGUA 49 -- ORTEGA ATTACKS U.S. "OCCUPATION" OF HAITI
C) 2009 MANAGUA 1090 -- FSLN PROTESTORS ATTACKS U.S. EMBASSY
D) 2009 MANAGUA 913 -- NICARAGUA RECOGNIZES BREAK-AWAY GEORGIA REPUBLICS
E) 2009 MANAGUA 912 -- ORTEGA ATTACKS U.S. IN ARMY ANNIVERSARY SPEECH
F) 2009 MANAGUA 871 -- NON-COOPERATION IN ARMS CASE
G) 2009 MANAGUA 599 -- MCC CANCELLED

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert J. Callahan, Ambassador, Department of State, Exec; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

¶1. (S) Over the last six weeks, President Ortega has made an uncharacteristically intense effort to pass messages of conciliation and cooperation in our direction. Ortega's actions include renewed cooperation on some dormant legal assistance requests, especially cordial treatment of visiting VIPs, a possible decision on a new Ambassador-designate, and a personal and quick response to the Ambassador's request for information from Ortega regarding the Secretary's planned trip to the region. Yet, over the past three years, such "good" behavior by Ortega has occurred only when he sought a particular political objective - e.g. the early-2009 "charm offensive" that unsuccessfully sought to prevent the partial termination of Nicaragua's MCC compact. The motivation behind the current "charm offensive" is still unclear, but is unlikely to portend a new, friendly Ortega with whom we can work in the long-term. End Summary.

GON Has Been Cooperative Lately

¶2. (S) Over the last few weeks, we have noted a concerted effort

by President Daniel Ortega and First Lady Rosario Murillo to send conciliatory signals our way. In late-January we were contacted by the Foreign Ministry seeking to re-engage us on a renewal of the Status of Forces Agreement governing U.S. troop presence in Nicaragua (REF A). At about the same time, the Foreign Minister and the Attorney General both indicated to the Ambassador that the government desired to be helpful on some long-stagnant evidence transfers requests we had made in 2009 (REF F). We also learned that Ortega recently approached Arturo Cruz, Jr, the former Ambassador to the U.S., about returning for a second tour as Managua's representative in Washington, a post that has been vacant since Cruz himself left it in March 2009 (details SEPTEL). Ortega, through Cruz, has also invited WHA DAS Julissa Reynoso to visit Managua. Additionally, both Ortega and Murillo were exceptionally, and uncharacteristically, friendly to the U.S. Delegation, led by DASD Dr. Frank Mora, that attended the February 22 change of command ceremony for Nicaragua's Military High Command. Both Ortega and Murillo spent several minutes with the USDEL prior to the ceremony and were effusive in their praise of U.S. mil-to-mil assistance. This string of events taken together, over the past six weeks, represents an unusually friendly level of communication and interaction by the Ortega government.

¶3. (C) On Friday, February 19, per instructions from Washington, the Ambassador contacted the President's office to inquire whether Ortega would participate in a proposed meeting between the Secretary and Central American heads of state that would take place in Guatemala during the first week of March. Normally our requests

MANAGUA 00000115 002 OF 004

of this nature go unanswered. However, within a few hours of making this initial contact, First Lady Murillo personally called the Ambassador seeking more information about the meeting. She also asked the Ambassador to visit the Ortega residence, which also serves as the Presidential "offices." NOTE: In 2007, Ortega refused to occupy Nicaragua's Presidential palace. Instead he governs the country - and runs his Sandinista party -- from his home. END NOTE. Murillo asked the Ambassador to meet that same evening following a Cabinet meeting; however, she later called to re-schedule for the afternoon of Saturday, February 20, explaining the cabinet meeting had run longer than expected.

Is this really "True Love?"

¶4. (C) During the Saturday afternoon meeting, the Ambassador found the First Couple cordial, even friendly, contrary to past experience. Ortega apologized for the attack on the Embassy in November (REF C), noting that he had personally intervened with the Chief of Police to ensure the Embassy [eventually] had protection from anti-riot units (and for the Ambassador himself on the following day). When the Ambassador noted our concern over the fact that senior FSLN leaders had been seen urging on the violent protestors, Ortega somewhat sheepishly acknowledged that at times, even he, cannot control his own people.

Ambassador to Ortega: Your Behavior Damages Our Relations

¶5. (C) The Ambassador raised the nearly year-long vacancy at Nicaragua's Embassy in Washington, noting that some in Washington perceive this as an intentional slight by Managua. Ortega responded slyly that he was on the verge of naming - likely in March - a new man (or, he noted, even a woman) to fill the post. ("Tal vez, una embajadora...") The Ambassador also protested Ortega's false claims about the U.S. "military occupation" of Haiti following the January 12 earthquake (REF B). He told Ortega the Secretary had been very angry at Ortega for the malicious comments.

Ortega responded weakly that he had spoken in ignorance, and that he later became aware that other nations had also sent troops.

¶6. (C) Turning to the Secretary's proposed Guatemala meeting with regional heads-of-state, Ortega expressed concern that U.S. intent was to force the issue of Honduras recognition. He restated Nicaragua's opposition to recognizing the Lobo government, adding that he would do nothing until the various censures on Honduras by multilateral bodies - the UN, OAS, SICA, Rio Group, and ALBA. - had been lifted. Ortega said he needed more information before agreeing, but ended the one-and-one-half-hour meeting on a friendly note. The First Couple's good will carried into Sunday, when they met with the U.S. delegation attending the change of command ceremony for Nicaragua's military high command. Ortega and Murillo were careful to spend several minutes chatting with each member of the USDel before the ceremony. Even Ortega's remarks, which included the typical anti-imperialist screed, were milder than normal.

MANAGUA 00000115 003 OF 004

What's "Wrong" With Ortega?

¶7. (C) While Ortega's true motives are only ever fully known to himself, over the past three years we have occasionally seen his "conciliatory" face, but only as a means to a short-term objective. We recall the unsuccessful charm offensive against us in early-2009 that sought to prevent the partial termination of MCC (REF G). It was followed by vicious and malicious public attacks over several months, culminating with Ortega's speech at the Army birthday celebration, when he accused U.S. forces of genocide (REF E) The pattern is a spurt of amity and cooperation that is immediately followed by distance, contempt, and even hostility regardless of whether his objective is achieved. At times it seems Ortega's subsequent "rejection" of his "intended" is more severe when he succeeds. Others - the Europeans, Taiwan, Japan, the World Bank and the IMF - have received similar treatment, often ahead of decisions on funding for foreign assistance or important visits. Nearly all have subsequently been spurned.

Is It Frustrated Foreign Policy?

¶8. (C) One of Ortega's current motives in seeking a "thaw" with us may be a reflection of his unsuccessful attempts to wean Nicaragua off the "imperialist" aid of the United States and Europe. He is keenly aware (and resentful) of Nicaragua's dependence upon outside assistance, especially ours. Given his constant anti-U.S. rhetoric, the scale and persistence of U.S. aid contrasts greatly with that of other patrons Ortega has actively wooed. Three years of persistent overtures to Iran have failed to produce anything besides ideological capital and a handful of commercial delegations. His long-standing ally, Cuba, continues to provide medical and educational "brigades" for rural Nicaragua, but these rely on Venezuelan funding and the support of their Nicaraguan hosts for sustenance. Russia has been Ortega's other promising target. His recognition of Georgia's two breakaway republics was clearly designed to please Moscow (REF D), and though Moscow has recently come through with some limited assistance, including a fleet of modern buses and the promise of military aid and cooperation, the commitment still falls far short of Cold War levels, for which Ortega had hoped. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was on the ground for less than 24 hours here during his mid-February trip.

Is It Unrequited ALBA?

¶9. (S) The ALBA bloc is an increasingly vocal and coordinated grouping that demands attention in international fora, both inside and outside the Hemisphere. Yet there are indications that the Ortega-Chavez revolutionary partnership may be suffering a cold snap. Over three years, Chavez has supplied Ortega with nearly a billion dollars in badly-needed "assistance," but Ortega's constant need for operating cash to off-set forfeited donor assistance is likely now wearisome for Chavez who faces growing domestic economic

MANAGUA 00000115 004 OF 004

difficulties. The Venezuelan in charge of the joint-venture ALBA de Nicaragua (ALBANISA), an umbrella holding company that channels Venezuelan funds, was recently "recalled" to Caracas after a series of unfortunate public statements about Venezuela's plan and goals in Nicaragua. The "dynamic duo" appears to have been strained by several factors, including disagreements over how aggressively to exploit Zelaya and the Honduras coup and rivalry over who is the Hemisphere's rightful heir to Castro's "revolutionary" legacy. Both Chavez and Raul Castro came here for the hastily-convened June 2009 ALBA/SICA/Rio Group meeting that followed the Honduras coup. Yet both confirmed for, but failed to attend, Ortega's July 19 gala commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Sandinista victory. Ortega was also surely stung by the last-minute cancellations of both Venezuela and Cuba for the recent military change of command. Even so, we do not/not believe that ALBA is in imminent danger of collapse. In fact, we are confident that Ortega would not recognize Honduras without prior consultation with, even authorization by, Chavez.

Comment

¶10. (C) At this point, we can only speculate as to Ortega's underlying aim or motive behind this current amiable countenance. We note that in Nicaragua's most famous theatrical work, "El Gueguense" (The Old Man), performers hold masks over their faces. The theme is deception, and the ubiquitous masks, with their false, painted-on smiles, symbolize the mutual distrust between the colonial-era indigenous population and their duplicitous Spanish overlords. The smiling masks project an outward appearance of comity and respect, while true visages and feelings are hidden from view. In our experience, Ortega's charm offensives are gueguense - short-lived and insincere. Perhaps in the face of less-than-successful foreign policy to diversify his donor base, and disenchanted with the lack of revolutionary camaraderie within the Bolivarian experiment, he simply seeks reassurance that we plan to stay on here. We will. And hope this new beginning does not end in disappointment, again.

CALLAHAN